

No Turning Back

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[0 : 00] Father God, please help us to understand your word. Thank you that all of your word is good for us. It is food for us. Please feed us. Please help me to be clear. Please help us to understand what you're saying. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Great. So I want to start with a question. Here is an Australian passport. It's legitimate. Would you ever swap an Australian passport for a North Korean one?

Would you ever do that? Swap an Australian passport for a North Korean one? Maybe you are still waiting for an Australian passport for you and your family. When you finally get an Australian passport, would you swap it for a North Korean one?

No, of course you wouldn't, would you? Because North Korea is not a free country, is it? So no free private ownership of property. No free movement. No free speech. No free elections.

The Constitution of North Korea says that it is a dictatorship of people's democracy. Whatever that means. I think that's an oxymoron, isn't it? No free internet. No proper infrastructure. No restaurants. No cafes. No cafe lattes.

[1 : 13] Which will, that'll stuff about half of you. No wealth accumulation. Lots of starvation. Lots of poverty, especially in the rural areas. And more than anything, no freedom of religion.

No freely turning up to church on a Sunday morning, as we do every Sunday. We take that for granted. According to Open Doors USA and the CMS, North Korea has been the number one persecutor of Christians for 18 years in a row.

Not a very good title, is it? But that's what it is. There's no way would we swap an Australian passport for a North Korean one, because life in North Korea is like slavery.

But that's exactly what these Galatians were doing. They were mature Christians. They were going well. They were trusting in Jesus. But some false teachers had fooled them into thinking they must keep Jewish laws to be right with God.

They said this. If you really want to be Abraham's children, if you really want to inherit his blessings, you need to be circumcised. You need to observe Jewish laws.

[2 : 25] After all, that's what all the heirs of Abraham did. And Paul has attacked this teaching from a number of different angles as we've gone through the book so far.

But today is the pinnacle of his argument. He says going from faith to works is like going from Australia to North Korea. It's like going from freedom to slavery.

Lots of freedom, slavery language in our passage. The end of his argument is there in 5 verse 1. Have a look over your page. 5 verse 1. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Now, we are Holy Trinity. We are not Galatia. We are a mature church. We are going well. Now, we don't follow Jewish laws. We are not confused about circumcision.

But there are many Christian traditions, many habits we have, many good practices we do around church and our Christian lives that we might easily turn into laws.

[3 : 29] Into must-dos that we must do to feel more right with God. And so standing firm is for us today as well.

We need to stand firm on the path of faith and not go back to the path of religious laws, of good works to get to heaven. That would be like swapping an Australian passport for a North Korean one, moving from freedom to slavery.

And so Paul today gives three reasons to stand firm. Three reasons to stand firm. They are the three points in your handout. So I'm going to read from verse 8. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

But now that you know God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? These verses are full of relationship language.

You see, they thought they had to earn a relationship with God. Paul says, hang on, you know God already. Or rather, you're known by God.

[4 : 41] You already have that relationship. You see, they received the Holy Spirit, which meant God was living inside them. They're as close to God as they can be.

They are already right with him. They are already his sons and daughters, already inheritors of blessings. They didn't need to keep the laws to earn this status.

They already received it. The moment they first heard and believed in Jesus. I want you to imagine if, imagine a son says to his father, Hey dad, I'm going to go out there and I'm going to earn my relationship with you.

I'm going to work for my inheritance. That would be crazy. Because it's already all his, isn't it? That's how it is with sons.

The Galatians were fooled into thinking they had to work for a relationship which they already had. And even though they were free people in that sense, Paul says, verse 9, Do you wish to be enslaved all over again?

[5 : 48] You see, the thing about slavery, apart from the whips and the beating, the thing about slavery is that it's a cruel, never-ending cycle. You see, no matter how much the slave works, he's not earning a paycheck.

No matter how much he works, he's not building up a retirement or a cushy pension for himself. He'll never earn a salary. It's a cycle of futility. Remember Israel, when they're in slavery in Egypt, Pharaoh was never going to say, Well done, you busy little Hebrews.

Here is a house, here is some money for all your years of back-breaking labor. It was never going to happen. They work till they die with nothing to show for it.

No reward, no blessing. It's a cruel and futile existence. You see, that's how it is with slaves. Sons and slaves. And in verse 10, you see the Galatians marching themselves back into slavery.

Have a look at verse 10. They began observing special days and months and seasons and years. Do you wish to be enslaved all over again?

[6 : 54] Asks Paul. He says you'll never be able to observe enough special days to please God. His standards are too high. You are walking yourself down a path of slavery.

For us, we will never get to the point where God says, Well done, good and faithful servant. You've kept the Ten Commandments for 50 years. Your church attendance has been magnificent during that time.

You have proven yourself worthy of heaven. Now come into your master's rest. It's never going to happen. The path of religious works of the law is futile.

It's also very cruel. I wonder if you know a lady called Judy Frankish. She's from the Nine O'Clock Service. She told me this during the week. Her relatives have a grandmother in America.

The grandmother is 92 years old and was dying in hospital just a couple of weeks ago. So the family told Judy that the grandmother was terrified in her hospital bed that she had not done enough to please God in her life.

[8 : 05] She was terrified now as she prepared to meet God whether she was good enough for him. And so Judy told them straight away some of the things we've been talking about in this series.

That it's not what you do. It's only what Jesus does. That we are saved by his blood and not our own performance. And in a Catholic church for 92 years no one ever bothered to tell this old lady that.

Until two weeks ago when Judy spoke up. You asked Judy about the timing of it and it's sort of a God only miracle how the conversation worked out. The family said the old lady is so happy now because after 92 years of slavery she is free.

Free from having to earn her way to heaven. Free from the doubt. Have I done enough to please God as I'm about to die? Here is a church who are already free.

They're already free from keeping the law. They're already in a relationship with God. Until they were led back down a path of slavery. Into a life of must do's.

[9 : 16] Must do's they could never fully achieve. Into a life of uncertainty and terror. Just like that poor old lady. Paul says stand firm.

Stand firm on the path of faith. Because you're already God's sons and daughters. You're not his slaves. So that's the first reason to stand firm.

And the second one, point two. Stand firm against false teaching. Smooth lies and the law. So we've been talking about false teaching a lot in this series.

And we've never really talked about the teachers themselves. They've always been kind of pantomime villains. You know pantomime villain? You know when they say, where is he? He's behind you. Where? You know like in a...

No? Okay. Kids dramas. They've always been sort of faceless, nameless people. But here Paul sort of gives us a portrait of what they are like. Verse 16 suggests they were enemies of the truth.

[10 : 14] Verse 17 says they are zealous to win over the Galatians. In other words, they want to make much of the Galatians. They want to flatter them with smooth talk and lies.

They want to pander to them. But Paul says for no good purpose. He says their mission is to alienate you from us. That is to shut people out from hearing the true gospel.

And the reason why? So that you may have zeal for them. In other words, the false teachers, they appear to be on the Galatian side. But they're only in it for their own fame and prestige.

To be made much of. So that you may have zeal for them. They have all the right chat. But ultimately enemies of the truth. Now it seems odd, doesn't it?

That people like that would get a hearing in the first place. But this is a really important thing. Every false teaching you've ever heard. Every false teaching has a nugget of truth in it.

[11 : 13] That's how they get in the door in the first place. No one stands at our door and says, I hate Jesus. And we say, oh, you would like the pulpit? No, they start by saying Jesus is Lord. They start with a nugget of truth.

That's how they're able to get in the door in the first place. Circumcision. Observing special days. It's in the Bible somewhere. Maybe it's true. Maybe it sounds like a correct thing. Maybe it's a salvation thing.

And so we listen. But it was designed to flatter and deceive and pander. To manipulate for no good, says Paul. Today in 2019, there is not a group of Jewish people running the Anglican diocese.

And so we're not likely to fall for the exact same lie that they did. But I wonder what other lies or flattery we might be susceptible to.

We all have long held Christian traditions. We've all got our own personal habits when it comes to our faith and our life in church. We're creatures of habit. Maybe we could elevate some things into salvation things.

[12 : 18] So, for example, we think God is more accepting of this style of baptism than that. We think if Jesus was here, he'd have communion from the cup.

He hates those little cups of grape juice. We think sometimes the Holy Spirit really loves the hymns and he hates that happy, clappy music. Perhaps. We have our own ideas about what HTD must do on a Sunday.

Which political party Christians must vote for. What our position on issues such as gender and sexuality and equality and immigration and climate change must be.

It would not be as hard as we think for someone or something to tug on these really tightly held opinions and turn them into must do's.

Into salvation level things. But unlike the false teachers, Paul was willing to be thought of as their enemy if it meant telling them the truth.

[13 : 17] That's verse 16. You see, it's always only parents who are willing to be hated by their children if it means telling them the truth. And that's how he described himself in verse 19.

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. See, Paul is the best sort of mother.

He nurtures his babies with truth, even if they hate him at the time. He's willing to go through labor pains to teach them about Jesus over and over again, as if for the first time.

So that Christ can be formed in them again. The way a baby grows in its mother. Standing firm with Paul and his gospel means sometimes having to say what is harder.

It means not twisting the Bible to suit our own emotions, our own experiences, our own agendas. When church leaders stand firm with Paul, maybe they can't pander to us as we like.

[14 : 19] But standing firm with Paul is to stand firm with the truth, which is the only thing that grows Christ in us. The way a baby grows or forms in a mother.

Stand firm because you're already in a relationship with God. Stand firm because the truth is what will grow us. And stand firm because the law only produces slaves.

I'm going to read from verse 21. Tell me you who want to be under the law. Are you not aware what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.

His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh. But his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These verses and our first reading, they retell the famous story of Abraham's family.

And the argument is very technical and very wordy. We won't do it all. But what you need to remember is this. That connection to Abraham is everything.

[15 : 22] If you can prove your connection to Abraham, that is everything. That's the ball game. It is everything to the three big religions in the world. It was the center of this lie in Galatia.

You remember with Abraham, two sons. Ishmael was born first. Remember that? Remember, because Sarah refused to wait for God to bless Abraham with a son.

And so Sarah took matters into her own hands. She forced her slave Hagar to sleep with her husband Sarah. And thus little Ishmael was born. Remember that. Paul says that incident with Hagar represents the path of works, the path of the law, of trying to earn God's blessings via human effort.

Verse 23 calls it according to the flesh. In that way, Hagar is similar to the law because both Hagar and the law were about human effort and human achievement and work.

Verse 25. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai. Remember Mount Sinai was where God gave Moses the law. So Hagar equals the law. On the other hand, Isaac's birth.

[16 : 32] Remember when Isaac was born, it was a miracle. He was impossibly born when Abraham and Sarah were in their 90s. He was a miracle. Verse 23 says he was born as the result of a divine promise.

And this is the important bit. Verse 24. Please look at verse 24. These things are being taken figuratively. The women represent two covenants.

What he's saying is this. Hagar and Sarah represent two different ways in the world to approach God. Two covenants. One via works, the law.

The other, trusting in God, faith. Paul says that approaching God via the law is like being an Ishmael, not an Isaac. Because that's exactly how Ishmael was born.

By manipulation and human effort. Not trusting in God. And here is the whammy. Verse 25. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem.

[17 : 36] Because she is in slavery with her children. You see, these false teachers from Jerusalem, they think they are making true sons of Abraham. They think they're making little Isaacs with their teaching.

Paul says, no, you from Jerusalem are making slaves. You're making Ishmaels. It's a massive whammy. It's the height of his arguments. People think they're being extremely Jewish.

He says, you are being extremely slavish. Extremely opposite to the people of God. Way back then, Ishmael was offended by Isaac.

Because when Isaac was born, it meant that Ishmael had lost his firstborn privileges as the son. And verse 29 happens. At that time, the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the spirit.

It is the same now. You see, their sibling rivalry was no one-off sort of family scuffle. It is the same now. It's a general principle. It's the same now in Galatia.

[18 : 36] See, the people were offended by Paul, by his gospel of faith alone. So they turned the whole church against him. It's the same now in Melbourne. To say that faith alone in Jesus is what saves is offensive.

Can you imagine saying to a religious person, yeah, I can see how devout you are, but you really need to trust in Jesus to be saved. Why, they say. I'm a devout person.

I go to mass or temple or the mosque. I've been going all my life. I say my prayers every day. I'm a good, decent citizen. I've never murdered anyone. You say, yes, great. That's how Ishmaels think.

But you see, Isaacs, that is Christians, Christians know how God counts his family. We know what the mark of Abraham is. It is faith, not religious works.

It's not a religious CV or resume we're going to hand up to God one day that he's going to be pleased with. It's offensive for good and devout people to learn that they are Ishmaels and not Isaacs.

[19 : 43] It's offensive to suggest that we are in just because we trust in Jesus' death. It's offensive to say that devout people, good people, can't save themselves.

And just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, it is the same now. People persecute Christians. Christians. Maybe you've experienced persecution for being a Christian, for trusting in the truth, in the true gospel, in your home or your workplace.

Christians are the most persecuted religion in the world by a mile. In Syria, Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, China, Eritrea, Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, England, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand.

And of course, where we started in North Korea, where they shoot Christians on sight when they profess their faith. Don't expect anything other than hostility if you stand with Paul and stand with the truth of the Bible.

The temptation will always be to soften our stance, as it were, to say that, yeah, all paths are equally acceptable to God, to trust in our traditions and our good habits and our good practices, rather than faith alone.

[20 : 58] The temptation will be to soften our stance, to win more friends and influence people the way the false teachers did. Verse 30, what does the scripture say? Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.

See, Paul here is not interested in a superficial unity. For the sake of, I don't know, some sort of veneer of friendship. He's not interested in blending faith, as the Roman Catholic Church blends faith and works.

Not every Catholic believes this, but it's the official position of the church. You're saved by faith and works. Paul's not interested in that sort of blend at all. He's not angry because they disagree with him.

He's angry because they think you can blend them. That you can say other paths are acceptable ways to God. He says, the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.

That's why I put the table on your handout. Paul is creating a gulf between two different paths to God. He's saying they're completely opposite. The way of Hagar and Ishmael, the way of Sarah, which produces Isaacs.

[22 : 11] They are not the same. They're completely opposite. Two different ways to approach God. Two different covenants, if you like. Paul says the way of Hagar will never share in the way of Sarah.

You're either an Isaac or an Ishmael. You're either a slave or you're free. You're either Australian or you're either North Korean. You can't be both. Standing firm means getting rid of that sort of teaching.

It means getting rid of that temptation to trust in other things rather than in Jesus. Paul says stand firm. You're already children.

That sort of teaching is only lies. He says the law produces Ishmael's, not Isaac's.

Five verse one. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Every week we say we are free in Christ. And I think we say it all the time at church. I'm not sure anyone really knows what it means.

[23 : 14] This is what it means. If we are free in Christ, we are free from the demands of the law. Free from having to earn our way into heaven. Free from guilt.

The guilt of our sin because Jesus carried it. Free from the wrath of a righteous God. Free from the hypnotic temptations to trust in all these good things that we do and have in our lives rather than in Jesus.

We are free from the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. We are free in Christ. Have you ever thought how amazing your freedom in Christ is? I was talking to Sia over there.

Sia and his family, they became Christians last year. We all remember that. It was a tremendous time of encouragement for us. I was talking to Sia at my house, I think three weeks ago.

It was about three weeks ago. And Sia said to me, he said, you know, you say these things about being free in Christ. Faith, not works. And he goes, but I look around at all you other Australians, you Christians, who have probably been Christians all your lives.

[24 : 20] And he goes, no one seems really that amazed by it. And he goes, until you've been a Muslim for 52 years, until you have to try and earn your way by keeping rules to God, you cannot understand how amazing it is that we are free in Christ.

I wonder, do we take that for granted that we are free? What a blessing. Free from not having to earn our way. Free from the uncertainty and the terror that that old lady felt in her hospital bed.

Have I done enough to please God? We are free to, if you like, to pass away in peace and with complete confidence. We don't like dying.

We might be afraid of dying, but we don't have to fear death. Because we are free in Christ. Because we trust in him alone. 5 verse 1.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm on the path of faith. Stand firm in Christ alone, in the truth. And do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

[25 : 28] So I pray that we would stand firm. Let's do that. Our Father God, please help us to stand firm. We are tempted to trust in all these other habits and practices and opinions.

And we're tempted to elevate all of them into salvation level things. To trust in them. Father, please help us to stand firm on the gospel. The true gospel. Please help us to get rid of bad teaching of bad temptations.

That would pull us away from only the path of faith in Jesus. Thank you that we are free. Thank you that we are saved because of his blood alone. And nothing we do.

In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen.